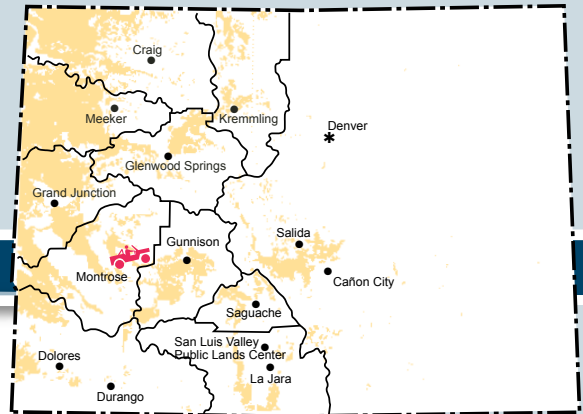


# COLORADO

## ROAD TRIP

### Gunnison Gorge NCA



May 2006

## Splish! Splash!

### Rafting Through the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area and Wilderness

By Karen Tucker

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Act of 1999 designated the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (NCA) and Wilderness Area as special lands to be permanently protected as a part of the National Conservation Area system. There are currently 14 NCAs managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the nation, and each is managed in accordance with special provisions in the designating legislation.

The Act of 1999 directs BLM to manage and protect the area's "exceptional multiple use opportunities" and "natural, cultural, scenic, wilderness and recreational resources." The legislation also upgraded the former Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument to National Park status. The NCA is part of BLM Colorado's Uncompahgre Field Office in Montrose, Colorado and is managed under a new Resource Management Plan, approved in November 2004.

The heart and most scenic portion of the NCA is the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, a spectacular wild river canyon which encompasses approximately 17,700 acres of public lands, including 11 miles of the Gunnison River. The best way to view this spectacular Wilderness area is from a raft, so let's go on a one day river trip with our BLM River Rangers.



GUNNISON RIVER NEAR BOULDER GARDEN



## Come Take a Virtual Gunnison Gorge One Day River Trip!

From Montrose, it takes approximately one hour to reach the Chukar trailhead via the Peach Valley Road and Chukar jeep road. The Chukar trail is the southernmost trail in the area and the only one which provides access for boaters. The Peach Valley Road is the primary access route to the western half of the Gunnison Gorge NCA. On the way to the Wilderness, we will first pass through the NCA's open vehicle play area where a new off-highway vehicle staging area is currently being constructed. We then drive through a limited use area where all travel is restricted to designated routes. Four of the designated jeep trails off the Peach Valley Road lead to the Chukar, Bobcat, Duncan, and Ute trailheads located on the western boundary of the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area. Nearly 20 miles of hiking trails within the wilderness are accessed from these four trail heads.

The Gunnison Gorge Wilderness sees approximately 10,000 visitors annually. Visitors can register and pay day use or camping fees at self-issuing permit stations located at the trailheads. The user fees help pay for the maintenance of the trailhead facilities and trails. Fees are also used for funding seasonal River Rangers, resource protection projects, such as the removal of tamarisk and other invasive plants, and the regular maintenance of 26 designated river campsites.

From the Chukar trailhead, we hike down the one-mile Chukar Trail, which descends approximately 600 feet to the boat put-in site located immediately downstream of the National Park's boundary. The trail is also used by a BLM-permitted horse packer to haul rafts and camping equipment to the river for commercial and private raft trips.

After the rangers' safety talk and directions on paddling, we board paddle rafts which will take us on a 14-mile river tour through the most scenic and wild portion of the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness. The water in the upper portion of the canyon contains primarily small Class II and III rapids (on a scale of river difficulty from I-easy to VI-extreme.)



KAYAKS ON CHUKAR ROAD



HORSEPACKER AND BOATERS AT CHUKAR TRAIL PUT-IN



DOWNSTREAM OF CHUKAR PUT-IN



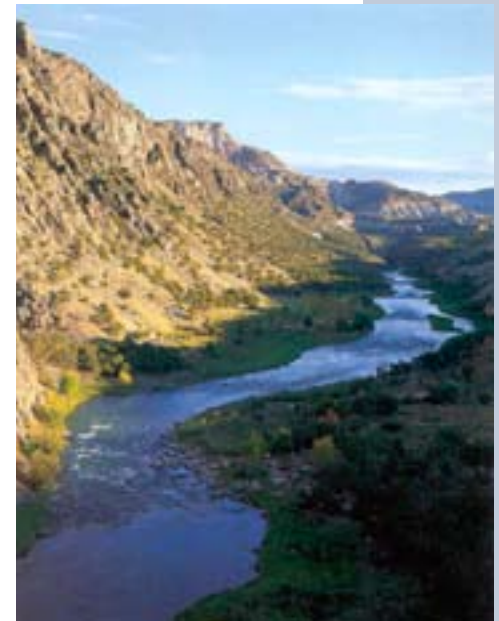


Along the way we are bound to see a lot of fishermen who have hiked to the river on the other Gorge trails. The Gunnison River in the Park and Gorge is a designated Gold Medal Trout River. The Gold Medal designation has drawn thousands of trout fishers each year to the Gorge seeking a high quality fishing experience. Special size and bag limit regulations are imposed to help protect the fishery and the BLM and the Colorado Division of Wildlife team up to conduct regular patrols in the Gorge to check fisher compliance with the regulations.



### FISHING NEAR CHUKAR TRAIL

The first portion of the trip takes us approximately half-way through the canyon to the BLM backcountry ranger station at Ute Park. Ute Park is a popular destination for wilderness fishers and backpackers. It is accessed from the rim by the 4.5 mile Ute Trail which contains portions of a historic Ute Indian route. The trail, which crosses the river at its shallowest point and continues up the east side of the NCA, was used by the Utes and early settlers to traverse back and forth across the steep canyon. Ute Park is also an excellent place to view the Ute Indian fault zone which is considered one of the best-exposed fault zones in Colorado.



## UTE PARK

After Ute Park, the boats traverse the steepest section of the Gorge, where the rapids become more technical, ranging from Class II+ to IV, depending on water levels. We then negotiate through a series of fun pool-drop rapids including Boulder Garden, The Squeeze, The Drops, and Cable Rapid. Make sure to keep a sharp eye out for some of the Gorge's inhabitants such as bighorn sheep, river otters, ringtail cats, mink, bobcats, mule deer, mountain lion, and peregrine falcons.



### BOULDER GARDEN RAPIDS



After Grand Finale rapid, we float through the peaceful “Hall of the River Kings” and the last of the canyon’s towering black Precambrian walls composed of earth’s ancient rocks streaked with pink granite-like rock formed from intrusive magma. We then make a short stop at the Smith Fork Day-Use area to take a fun hike up to some waterfalls and swimming holes.



HALL OF THE RIVER KINGS

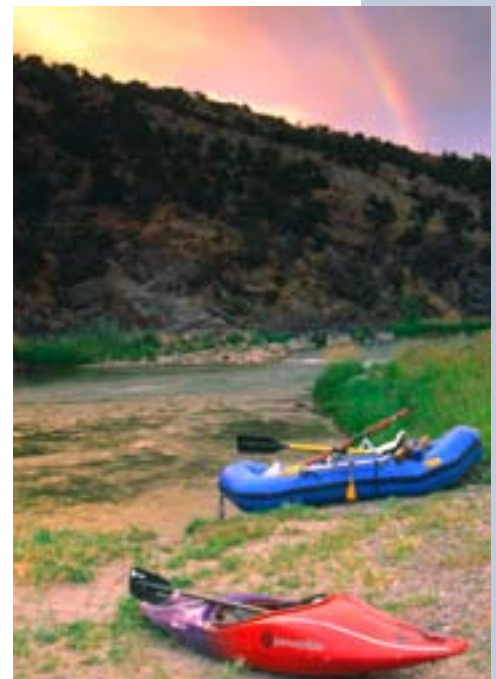
The last part of our trip meanders four miles through colorful sedimentary canyons to the BLM take-out at the Gunnison Forks Day-Use Area located near Hotchkiss, Colorado, approximately one hour’s drive from Montrose.



ENTRADA WALL BELOW SMITH FORK

We hope you have enjoyed this virtual Gunnison Gorge Wilderness river trip!

Come see us soon!



BOATS AT UTE PARK